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Web services make on-line selling simple

Most small-business owners probably feel left out of the on-line retail revolution that is under way on the Internet.

It's no wonder. There are announcements almost every day by major organizations regarding their foray into the world of on-line sales. We hear endlessly about the success of companies such as Amazon.com and Dell Computer, with their millions of dollars in daily transactions.

Some of us have stuck a toe in the water, placing an order form on our Web site that people can send via E-mail to purchase a product. We then proceed to handle the order manually, all the time secretly longing for the ability to implement a system that will handle real-time credit card authentication, shipping charges, tax calculations and all the other accoutrements of a sophisticated Web store.

What has held us back is the complexity of such a project. There is no doubt that the cost to establish an on-line store has been prohibitive for many small businesses. In most cases, you need an expensive, high-end computer server, a full-time, direct connection to the Internet and a sophisticated catalogue program. Once you pull all that together, you'll likely need expert implementation assistance, not to mention a degree in rocket science in order to put in place real-time credit card processing. It's enough to send any entrepreneur running for cover.

Welcome to the revolution — we're now seeing the emerging of what the Internet industry is coming to call "e-commerce service providers" that make it extremely easy for a small business to create an on-line store in minutes.

Take the IBM Home Page Creator for e-commerce service, for example. Sign up for the "bronze" service for a monthly fee of \$89.95, and you'll get just what you need to create your own Web site with real-time credit card authentication, multiple shipping rates, product descriptions and images. I've used the service to establish an on-line store to sell several of my books. Established by the small-business division of **International Business Machines Corp.** of Armonk, N.Y., the service incorporates taxation specifics for several countries, including Canada.

There are many other services



E-BIZ

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such as this one beginning to appear. Two other service providers that, unlike many of their U.S. counterparts, pay close attention to Canadian tax issues are Vancouver-based **SunCommerce Corp.** and **DXShop**, owned and managed by **DXStorm Inc.** of Oakville, Ont. Both will let you go in and create an on-line store in a matter of minutes, try the store out for 15 days, and then sign up for a fee that starts at about \$100 a month if you are convinced of the potential.

Can you sell stuff on the Internet? I remember the day that I was bouncing around the office when a \$150 order came in. Having said that, I'll also admit that my own venture into on-line sales is in a deficit position right now, but I'm willing to make the investment.

The biggest problem may be getting your merchant credit card accounts set up. There seem to be far too many credit card representatives who shudder as soon as they hear the word Internet. In one case, it took me almost three months to get an account.

Although this technology makes it easy to build an on-line store, that doesn't mean you should rush right out and do it. Before taking the plunge, you should carefully weigh the annual cost of at least \$1,200 against the potential for sales. Second, you should seriously consider whether your product is the type that actually sells on-line. Third, you've got to be in this for the long haul — don't expect short-term magic.

Related Web sites

For more information on IBM Home Page Creator, SunCommerce or DXShop, visit:

mypage-products.ihost.com

www.suncommerce.com

www.dxshop.com

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